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AUTHOR Sandhu, Daya Singh
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ABSTRACT

This paper emphasizes the significance of cultural diversity in American schools and its implications for the teaching and learning processes. Also highlighted is the importance of the realization that diversity is what makes the United States unique. The paper discusses the cultural dynamics of clashes and conflicts as well as of cooperation and cohesiveness in a school setting where different ethnic groups meet. A framework is provided for examining differences in world views; clashes in cultural values; culture-based preferences for learning environments; barriers due to cultural differences; learning style differences in cultures predicated on the philosophy that all students can learn, that students learn differently, and that students learn better when they are taught in their specific learning styles; historical hostilities and prejudice problems; cultural differences and alienation; and cultural taboos. The document concludes with a three-step model for culturally responsive teaching. The three steps of action, acceptance, and awareness, suggest a number of teacher initiated behaviors to manage diversity and encourage interactions that are enhanced by differences. (Contains 25 references.) (LL)

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Cultural Diversity in Classrooms : What Teachers Need to Know

Running Head: Cultural diversity in classrooms

Daya Singh Sandhu is an assistant professor in the department of Educational and Counseling Psychology at University of Louisville, KY 40292. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to him at this address. He may also be contacted by telephone at (502) 588-0629.

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Cultural Diversity in Classrooms: What Teachers Need to Know

> The power, the efficiency, and the beauty of all things is a function of their differences.
>
> _____ Frieda M. Holt

Introduction:

The major thesis of this paper is to emphasize the significance of cultural diversity in American schools and its implications for teaching and learning processes. Furthermore, it is to highlight the new realization that " diversity is what makes United States unique. Diversity is here to stay and America is learning to build on it, to appreciate its potential, and to validate and affirm it" (Ramirez III, 1991, p.5).

New Trends : There are several factors that have emerged in the last three decades which have stimulated a great interest in culture diversity to acknowledge, celebrate, and promote it in our society. Beyond the rhetoric of "E Pluribus Unum", it is only recently that multi-culturalism has become a reality as the Fourth Force (Pedersen, 1991). Like other three forces, "psychoanalysis", "behaviorism, and " humanism", unquestionably "multiculturalism" will have a long lasting impact upon our feelings, thoughts, and actions in all fields of human endeavors. A cursory look at some of those factors that have recently attributed to multiculturism and its significance include:

a. Shift in Melting Pot Theory

Initially, Crevecoeur (1904), a French writer posited the social theory of America as a " Melting Pot". The idea that new imigrants when they adopt America as their home, will naturally adopt its cultural values was again popularized by Israel Zangwill in his play, "The Melting Pot" in 1908. But the stark realities of the Civil Rights Movement of 1960s proved that the "melting pot" theory was neither intended nor accepted by all ethnic groups (Bennett, 1990).

Mostly ethnic groups resisted "melting pot" phenomenon in order to maintain their own individual but distinct ethnic identity. The Civil Rights Movement ushered a new era in our national history which popularized the idea of cultural pluralism (Axelson, 1985). Perception of America from "a melting pot" is changed to " a salad bowl". (This author prefers to call it a "bouquet of flowers" to avoid imagery of getting melted or being eaten up).

b. Population Growth Trends

Several authors (Bennett, 1990; Harry,1992; Hodgkinson, 1985; & Spencer, 1989) have projected that by the turn of the century, minority population will grow significantly while White population will suffer great declines. Bennett (1990) estimates that by the year 2000, minority students will exceed more than 30 percent in schools. Based on 1990 U.S. Consensus figures, Harry (1992) claims

that "the use of the term minority is already meaningless in many large urban school districts, such as Baltimore, where 80 percent of the student body is Black, and New York City, where 38 percent are Black and 34 percent Hispanic" (p.7).

It may also be pointed out that 1986 Immigration laws will add a large number of people of color from third world countries with a different set of values and world views (Lee, 1989). It is but natural that to keep up with the new trends of population growth, cross-cultural sensitivities and understandings are enhanced.

c. Education Reform Movements for Excellence

A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform, a report prepared by the U.S. Department of Education in 1983 sent a stunning warning to educators, legislators parents, and community leaders. As a wake up call, this report read,

> If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well viewed it as an act of war. (p.5)

Many states since 1983, have been pro-actively involved in the implementation of the recommendation made by the Presidential

Commission. In our own state, Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 as outlined in House Joint Resolution 54 (HJR 54) is an offshoot growth of this reform movement. The basic theme of all reform movements is to promote excellence in education which is not possible without addressing academic and culturally-specifc needs of minority students.

d. A Shift from Equality to Equity

There is a new realization that equal opportunity as established by Brown v. Board of Education (1954) case may be necessary but not sufficient to address the needs of special populations. Bennett (1990) puts it eloquently, " Equity in education means equal opportunities for all students to develop to their fullest potential.... Potentials may differ, and at times equity requires different treatment according to relevant differences" (p.13). The real focus of cultural diversity in a classroom is to recognize, appreciate, and address these differences.

CULTURE-SPECIFIC BEHAVIORS IN CLASSROOMS

What is a culture? The term culture has been defined, refined, and redefined in a number of ways, but it still eludes full description. For our purpose, a simple definition of culture presented by Helman (1990) should suffice:

> Culture is a set of guidelines (both explicit and implicit)

> which individuals inherit as members of a particular society, and which tells them how to view the world, how to experience it emotionally, and how to behave in it in relation to other people... and to the natural environment. (pp. 2-3)

Within this framework of "culture", this article discusses the cultural dynamics of clashes and conflicts or cooperations and cohesiveness in a school setting where different ethnic groups meet.

1. Differences in World Views:

Students from different ethnic groups may perceive people and events differently. Sue & Sue (1990) points out that the world views of several ethnic groups in America are related to racism and lower position assigned to them in society. If that is the case, it would become difficult for minority students to trust their teachers from a majority culture as their benefactors. Furthermore, these stuedents might not accept the subject matter taught in classes as authentic, relevant, and useful for them.

Ogbu (1992) makes another subtle but very strong point that involuntary minority students (specifically African American students) are torn between school expectations and their community and personal affiliations causing failures and frustrations. Put succinctly,

> An involuntary minority student desiring and striving to do well in school is faced with the conflict between loyalty to the minority peer group, which provides a sense of community and security, and the desire to behave in ways that may improve school performance but that the peer group defines as "White." (p. 10)

2. Clashes in cultural values

Cultures differ on the basis of their values. What is valued or appreciated in one culture, might become repugnant and is rejected altogether in another culture. In some situations, cultural conflicts can become personality conflicts leading to emotional turmoil and frustrations. Misunderstandings may arise when people with different cultural values interact and fail to understand priorities and viewpoints of those who belong to an

other ethnic group. Some global values of the East and the West are presented below by this author to demonstrate striking differences in them:

Western World	Eastern World
1. Active adjustment	1. Passive acceptance
2. Self-control	2. Self-expression
3. Mechanistic view of the universe	3. Organic view of the universe
4. More emphasis on the natural (phenomenon)	4. More emphasis on the supernatural (phenomenon)
5. Emphasis upon the body and mind.	5. Emphasis on soul
6. Knowledge is important.	6. Wisdom is important.
7. Communication patterns are circular or horizontal	7. Communication patterns are vertical.
8. Values are relative in nature.	8. Values are absolute
9. Philosophy of life is pragmatic.	9. Philosophy of life is

	idealism.
10. Glorification of the individual.	10. Glorification of the family
11. Analytic thinking	11. Holistic thinking

The ramifications of such opposing values in daily relationships, communications, and learning situations are many and far reaching when people from European/ dominant culture come in contact with other ethnic groups. Euro-Americans generally base their decisions and behaviors on the Western values, while most of the other ethnic groups have their priorities drawn from the Eastern values.

3. Culture-based Preferences for Learning Environments

Anderson (1989) contends that preference for learning environments is rooted in the cultural backgrounds of the students. Traditional students, mostly from European cultures, have different preference for learning environments than their counterparts who belong to diverse ethnic backgrounds. Anderson (1989) summarizes these differences in the following chart:

Comparison of Differences Between Diverse and Traditional Students

Diverse	Traditional
Prefer cooperative learning environment	Prefer competitive learning environment
Prefer group study	Prefer individual study

Minimize distance when communicating	Increase distance when communicating
Communicating style is informal and conversational	Communicating style is more formal and rigid
Express emotions freely	Express emotions selectively
See time as flexible and subjective	Adhere to rigid time schedules
Task orientation relative to personal demands	Task completion takes primacy
Utilize relational and affective learning styles	Know when analytical style is more appropriate
Seek personal relevance when processing information	Process relevant or irrelevant information efficiently

(p. 8)

4. Barriers due to Cultural Differences

A number of barriers due to different cultural experiences can pose threats among members of various ethnic groups to create tensions, conflicts, and disharmony. In learning and teaching processes, these barriers can prove unsurmountable blocks which can be detrimental to academic accomplishments of the students. There are several contributing factors to this dilemma. Some of these most important factors include:

Cultural dissonance:

When people from different cultural styles interact, cultural dissonance occurs. If not conscious about these differences, people from one cultural group could consider the others as arrogant, naive, bad mannered, inconsiderate, etc. Communications breakdown, misunderstandings develop, and genuine relationships may never develop. Teachers sensitive to cultural styles would note

that generally speaking Euro-Americans have direct style characteristics while many minority people use more informal, slower-paced approaches in communications and relationships (Harry, 1992).

Cultural dissonance may also occur when two persons with different cultural experiences meet and fail to understand each other's different perspectives. Draguns (1981) coined two words emic and etic to explain this problem. Etic, is one's subjective understanding of a situation who actually experienced it, etic is an outsider's objective understanding of that situation. Many times these perceptions contradict and clash.

Learning Style Differences in Cultures:

The underlying philosophy of learning styles research is based on three major premises:

a. all students can learn.
b. students learn differently.
c. students learn better when they are taught in their specific learning styles.

Because this philosophy is consistent with the philosophy of Reforms in Education Movement, popularity and major focus of research in the area of learning styles these days is self-evident. In addition, a new and very fertile area for research is the impact of cultural differences on the learning style preferences. Initial

investigations seem to suggest that cultural differences do matter in the learning styles of various ethnic groups (Dunn, R., & Griggs, S.A. 1990; Sandhu, 1991; Worthley, 1987). For detailed information about learning styles, see my other article in this publication.

Historical hostilities & Prejudice Problems.

Historical hostilities and cultural prejudices are perpetuated in the minds of children by overt and covert messages sent constantly by the adults, media, and the contemporary events. Based upon some of the facts, other on the myths and stereotypes, problems related to racism continue to create problems in relationships. In a foreword to Kavanagh and Kennedy's (1992) book, Frieda Holt alludes to this perennial problem of humans:

> Nature is a symphony of diversity, and therein lies its magnificence. It is interesting that we have noticed this and taken advantage of it in every living system with the exception of our own. Human beings have interpreted differences as symbols to fear. (Foreword, ix)

A review of history and literature related to minority ethnic groups reveals a "collective anger" that remains unresolved. It seems to be particularly true about involuntary minorities, "people who were originally brought into the United States or any other society against their will. For example, through slavery, conquest, colonization, or forced labor" (Ogbu, 1992, p.8).

Cultural differences and alienation

When people feel different from those around them, as minority

students in a class of students mostly from dominant culture or vice versa, they feel psychologically uncomfortable, alienated and lonely. "People who feel different feel misunderstood" (Ramirez III, 1991, p.2). This feeling of being misunderstood and a sense of not belonging to the majority group, leads people to reject other cultures, ethnic groups, and institutions.

In their discussion about student types, Good and Brophy (1990) make a similar point asserting that "Alienated students are reluctant learners and potential dropouts. In the extreme, they reject the school and everything that it stands for" (p.319).

Cultural differences in communications

Obviously, individuals who are recent immigrants from non-English speaking countries face a number of difficulties in both written and oral communications. Language deficits become deficits in building rapport and relationships. Stereotypes develop. Students coming from non-English speaking homes may suffer from lack of verbal skills and become academically at-risk.

Many bilingual people appear slow in their communications as they have to take time to translate and re-translate from their native language to English. It is important to note that many languages don't follow the same sentence structure, "subject-verb-object" as in English.

Sue and Sue (1990) argue that the patterns of communication

are rooted in the cultural backgrounds of the people. They maintain that "American Indians, Asian Americans, and Hispanics... function under different cultural imperatives" (p.43). The people raised in these culture may have different communication patterns than their counterparts in the dominant culture. For example, in some cultures children are taught "not to speak until spoken to" or never question elders or the authority figures. Students coming from these cultures may never question their teachers or ask for clarifications, even though they do not understand what is being taught.

While discussing language and speech of Black males, Lee (1992) makes another very interesting point about the style of expressions. As an example, he suggests that "Colorful expressions, "woofing," playing the "dozens," and popular 'rap" vernacular are innovative ways that have been developed to communicate both the trivial and the profound" (p.14) by the Black males. But such styles of expressions might not be acceptable in traditional classrooms.

Nonverbal communication is another very fascinating area that plays an important role in cross-cultural communications.

Culturally specific nonverbal behaviors acceptable in one culture but unacceptable in the other culture may cause difficulties and barriers in relationships. Some of the most often-quoted examples include, patterns of eye contact, use of personal and interpersonal

space, and facial expression differences in people from different cultures. For a detailed study on nonverbal communication, please refer to Hall, 1976; Knapp, 1980; Mehrabian, 1972; & Wolfgang, 1985).

Cultural Taboos

All cultures have some special rules for living. Members are expected to adhere to those rules. However, those rules which are very desirable in one culture, may become an annoyance and problematic to the people from another culture. A few such examples are in order:

a. Food: Eating beef is strictly forbidden in Hinduism and Sikhism. All pig and pork products are forbidden in Islam and Judaism (Helman, 1990). School personnel must be sensitive to the special dietary needs of children coming from these groups when preparing cafeteria menus.

b. Clothes Most of the Asiatic cultures require that women and adolescent girls dress up fully. At a graduation night, a student from such a culture may decide not to attend the graduation ceremonies if she is required to wear the dress.

c. Dating In many cultures, marriages are arranged by the parents. Dating is not allowed. Many parents from these cultures are worried and concerned at social functions where boys and girls are freely allowed to mix. Teachers must be cautious about these parents' concerns when they arrange

for activities such as junior and senior class Prom.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING

There are very few, if any, public schools in the United States which are culturally homogeneous. The issues and concerns related to cultural diversity are very real and crucial in teaching and learning. As educators, we teach students first, and then the subject matter. If glorification of the individual is the ideal of our national and educational philosophy, naturally it is high time that we don't only promote democracy but also cultural democracy. In order to meet this challenge, it is imperative that we don't only provide equal opportunities, but also equitable conditions for learning.

In order to develop a culturally responsive teaching, I propose a three-step model, which consists of a number of teacher initiated behaviors at each step as shown below:

Action	Step 3
Acceptance	Step 2
Awareness	Step 1

(A Three-Step Model for Culturally Responsive Teaching)

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Step One: Awareness

Culturally responsive teachers,

* Actively seek knowledge about other cultures and ethnic groups through all means available to them.
  Examples: Books, films, community resource people, etc.
* Learn how to create equitable learning conditions for students who are from diverse ethnic backgrounds.
  Examples: Be aware of culturally specific learning styles, values, and behaviors.
* Examine their own beliefs, values, and behaviors how they might have positive or negative effects upon the culturally different/ distinct students.

Step Two: Acceptance

Culturally responsive teachers,

* Accept the notion that cultural diversity is an asset, a strength that makes America so great.
* Accept the notion that all students can learn. Furthermore, culturally responsive teachers believe that all students have potentials to excel in the areas of their interests.
* Respect divergent thinking and different viewpoints of their students.

Step Three: Action

Culturally responsive teachers,

* Empower their students through personal attention, encouragement and support.

* Practice behaviors that are free from prejudice, biases,

and stereotypes and also encourage their students to do so.

* Are genuine, considerate and empathic with their students both in and outside the classroom.
* Are committed to promote cultural diversity and are open to new experiences and challenges.

In the end, I would like to conclude in words of Kavanagh and Kennedy (1992):

> Managing diversity means developing awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, and skills that encourage authentic, effective interaction, that is, interaction that is enhanced, rather than hindered, by differences. (p.5)

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